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SUBJECT: THIS WEEK IN ALBANIA, MAY 31 - JUNE 6, 2008

11. (U) The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

12. (U) CLASHES OVER HIGH COURT NOMINATIONS: It has been almost a month since President Topi issued decrees appointing five new members of the High Court (similar to the U.S. Supreme Court), and to date the Speaker of Parliament, Jozefina Topalli, has not allowed Parliament to vote on the nominations. The failure to appoint the new justices has lead to difficulties in the operation of the 17-member Court, which finds itself overloaded with cases and lacking the necessary quorum to form a panel. This week the term in office of two other justices came to an end, bringing the number of vacancies to an all time high of seven.

13. (U) Socialist opposition leader Edi Rama accused Speaker Topalli this week of violating the constitution on this issue and has called for a motion of no-confidence against her. With public pressure over the case growing, Topalli rejected accusations that she had overstepped her powers and insisted that President Topi must consult Parliament before putting forward judicial nominations. In fact, Topi did not consult with Parliament prior to making the nominations, as in the past it had been the practice to nominate judges without Parliamentary consent. Some cynics attributed the President's decision not to consult Parliament as an unspoken response to recent Constitutional amendments that altered presidential elections (consultations on which were not conducted with the President).

14. (U) The recent clashes come at a time of heightened tension between the ruling majority and the opposition that have been generated in large part by the majority's continued failure to lift former Defense Minister Mediu's immunity following an April 25 request by Prosecutor General Ina Rama. Since the High Court hears cases against high level officials, lines have been drawn over the ongoing Gerdec criminal investigation and the seven upcoming appointments to the Court. While it is not clear whether Parliament will approve the President's nominations, the recent clash between Speaker Topalli and President Topi has revealed the first open rift between the two government institutions. Furthermore, her reluctance to allow Parliament to vote on the decrees sets a negative precedent for the rule of law and division of power in this NATO candidate country.

SOCIETY AND POLITICAL CULTURE

15. (U) CORRUPTION AND GETTING THINGS DONE IN ALBANIA:
For the past decade corruption has become the main discourse in Albanian politics and social life. It is present in daily

conversations among average individuals, a dark, hovering cloud that rains on every citizen's life. From the moment you enter a hospital, school, ministry, government building, court, or even to get a birth certificate from the registration and records office, a person must pay an extra unofficial fee or know a friend on the inside to get anything accomplished.

¶6. (U) Corruption is not a new phenomenon in Albania, but an ongoing occurrence that can be traced back to time immemorial. While some political scientists claim that corrupt politicians and institutions are an indication of what the country is like as a whole, others believe that corrupt politics are in fact shaping the structure of society. It is hard to say which came first, the chicken or the egg, but it is easy to see its impact on everyday life in Albania.

¶7. (U) The level of faith that individuals place in their politicians, governments, and institutions depends on past history as well as the always-fluctuating social dynamics that characterize countries in transition. The current state of institution building is difficult, and getting things done without money or nepotistic practices is almost impossible. At the individual level, Albanian society is still learning democratic behavior and what it entails. However, in a society that prefers face to face interactions and word of mouth procedures, the coffee shop is often the place where things get done - whether it is acquiring a copy of your birth certificate or securing an appointment with your doctor. Some things never change.

CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

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¶8. (U) SUMMER IS HERE BUT THE ALBANIANS ARE GONE: As the summer heat arrives, many Albanians are searching for a quick getaway at the pool or a nearby beach. Few families can afford to spend entire days on the Adriatic or Ionian coasts or plan for a vacation in the southern cities of Albania, a tourist destination frequented by Kosovar Albanians. But those who can afford a long vacation are increasingly choosing to go abroad, as the Albanian coast has seen few infrastructure improvements in recent years while prices have continued to rise. Although Albania's southern coast is a preferred destination, the trip is long and difficult, and can only be done by car. Once there, the price of food and accommodation often does not reflect the quality of service provided.

¶9. (U) Those who can have started to look for other destinations. Turkey is the most popular, with low visa costs and convenient application procedures for Albanian citizens. Complete travel packages provide not only airfare, but also food and accommodation at more competitive prices than visiting the Albanian coast. Like most consumers, Albanians want the biggest bang for their buck, and many times that can be found outside their own borders.

¶10. (U) YOUNGER BERISHA RESOLVES DISPUTE: There is an old communist-era building in central Tirana, still referred to as the Palace of Culture, which houses an international bookstore patronized mostly by foreigners. A dispute over the store's damaged inventory was recently resolved by none other than the Prime Minister's daughter, Argita Berisha. Ms. Berisha, whose private law practice in Tirana has flourished in recent years, has increasingly found an enviable demand for her services. In her most recent case, the poor quality of renovation work on the second floor above the bookstore led to a fight between the Italian renovation company and the bookstore owner, who sought damages for his ruined inventory. The dispute was settled out of court when Ms. Berisha's services were procured by the bookstore. In what can only be described as a demonstration of her keen legal skills, the owners of the second floor business paid damages the next day, an uncommonly fast resolution in a country where law suits can take years to resolve themselves.

QUOTE OF THE WEEK

¶11. An excerpt from Ambassador Withers' statement this week on recent troubling political developments regarding the Gerdec investigation: "The American government and people will be deeply concerned if any political faction, party, or leader makes statements or takes actions that in any way injects a political agenda into what must be an impartial and independent investigation based on the rule of law."

WITHERS